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ABSTRACT

The importance of following prescribed principles in the implementation of an effective law-related education (LRE) program is emphasized. Based on research findings that law-related education is a delinquency-prevention technique, the fact sheet lists six prescriptions for providing effective law-related education programs: (1) the use of teaching strategies that foster true interaction and joint work among students; (2) the judicious selection and presentation of illustrative case materials; (3) the provision of a sufficient quantity of instruction; (4) adequate preparation and use of outside resource persons; (5) professional peer support for teachers; and (6) active involvement of building administrators in law-related education. The document concludes that while research may reveal other factors to be important, these six factors are critical in enabling teachers to provide LRE programs that are effective for delinquency-prevention. (LH)

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IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE LRE PROGRAMS

ERIC FACT SHEET
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Implementing Effective LRE Programs

Can law-related education help prevent delinquency? Preliminary results of a study being conducted by the Social Science Education Consortium (SSEC) and the Center for Action Research (CAR) indicate that LRE may indeed hold promise as a delinquency-prevention technique. The results indicate that when properly taught, law-related education can have a positive effect on delinquency and can improve a range of student attitudes related to delinquency (e.g., acceptance of violence, reliance on relationships with delinquent peers).

These results have understandably generated considerable excitement. But an important caveat must be kept in mind. Stated simply, if law-related education does not follow prescribed principles, the result may be no change or an increase in delinquent behavior, rather than the reduction desired.

What are these "prescribed principles" and what are their implications for program planning and implementation? Those are the questions addressed in this fact sheet.

What are the prescribed principles for effective LRE?

Classroom observations indicated that several factors differentiated the four LRE classes that showed reductions in delinquent behavior from the other six classes studied. The following factors appear to hold the key: (1) use of teaching strategies that foster true interaction and joint work among students, (2) judicious selection and presentation of illustrative case materials, (3) provision of a sufficient quantity of instruction, (4) adequate preparation and use of outside resource persons, (5) professional peer support for teachers, and (6) active involvement of building administrators.

How can an LRE teacher foster true interaction and joint work among students?

The classroom observations indicated that teachers can develop the kind of interaction and interdependence among students that results in positive attitude changes in three ways: by helping students develop the skills of dealing with controversy and conflict, by expanding opportunities for cooperative learning, and by fostering active student participation.

While teachers value the ability and willingness of persons, as citizens, to deal with controversy, they tend to "cool out" controversy when it occurs in class by denying its legitimacy ("Let's all get along, now"), raising the discussion to a higher level of abstraction or changing the topic, or constructing a "plausible" resolution for the disagreement and announcing it to the class, thereby cutting off further discussion. Most teachers do not systematically teach the skills of engaging in controversy, and students are correspondingly clumsy at it.

Commitment to peers is an important variable in predicting delinquency, and structured cooperative learning builds favorable peer relations. Classroom observations indicated that small-group work is used more in LRE classes than others, but it still is not used often Small-group work appears to be most successful when the following conditions prevail: (1) one or two clear instructions guide group work, (2) adequate time is given to complete the assigned task in the small group, (3) the task calls for cooperative work — not independent student work around a small-group table, (4) the students have the knowledge and skills necessary to do the work, and (5) groups have from two to five members.

The third aspect of instruction related to interaction is the fostering of active student participation. Observations indicated that classes are generally teacher-dominated. Teachers talk even when a clear opportunity to foster student-student interaction exists. Some students participate far more than others, even when the teacher dominates instruction. The fast pace associated with good classroom management also permits little probing and little time for students to construct thoughtful responses to complex questions.

Other research supports these findings, further indicating that teachers are more likely to seek and provide appropriate feedback to participation by high-achievers. Low-achievers are less likely to have the opportunity to participate and more likely to receive a teacher response that does not offer useful feedback. Furthermore, low-achievers are unlikely to participate in small groups unless the situation is structured to permit or require it.

What are the implications of these findings?

LRE teachers need training in methods of fostering interaction and joint work. They need instruction in the skills and procedures necessary to use controversy constructively. They need training in structuring, managing, and evaluating small-group work. They need to understand specific occasions where participation is most useful and be aware of those instances when it is most often curtailed. Teachers need to know how to assess and record the nature and frequency of student participation in their classes, as well as how to increase the level and quality of participation. LRE trainers should model these techniques, make explicit their importance in providing an effective LRE course, and provide teachers with opportunities to practice their use.

What is meant by "judicious selection and presentation of illustrative case materials"?

Teachers supplement textbook material with examples drawn from other sources, including newspaper and magazine articles and their own experiences. In searching for materials with high imagery and high intrinsic interest, teachers may not review the examples used in a lesson or unit to determine whether they present a balanced view of the legal system. Cases should not consistently depict the legal system as flawless, nor should they be unrelentingly negative. The teachers in classes that reduced delinquency struck a balance between respect for the law and healthy skepticism about its application.

This fact sheet was compiled from information prepared by two staff members of the Law-Related Education Evaluation Project — Judith Warren Little, Program Associate at CAR, and Frances Haley, Assistant Director of the SSEC. Both organizations are based in Boulder, Colorado.

How much LRE is "sufficient"?

While a short segment of LRE may do students some good, measurable — or even noticeable — behavior change is not a likely result. The intrinsic complexity and ambiguity of LRE topics demand that teachers clearly organize and sequence instruction, thoughtfully integrate new ideas with practical application, and provide checks on understanding and mastery. Accomplishing these tasks is probably possible only in a course covering all or most of a semester. It is also unlikely that a teacher could accomplish these tasks without using a coherent curriculum; pulling together peripherally related bits and pieces from many sources into the kind of carefully organized program described here would be extremely difficult.

The necessity for sufficient time to treat complex issues was demonstrated in observations of several classes, where the "lure of high interest materials" carried the weight of the class, ensuring that the class would proceed smoothly and that students' attention would be captured. Students' comments, however, revealed considerable variation in understanding of the concepts and principles at stake in the case materials. In some instances, high interest materials lost their appeal when students had little command over the ideas required to analyze and interpret them; the result was boredom, confusion, and frustration.

The "quantity of instruction" prescription seems to have a "quality" dimension as well, then. Is that true?

Yes. Teachers need enough time to develop understanding of complex concepts and to demonstrate the practical application of those concepts. *And* they need to present the concepts and applications in well-planned lessons that have clear objectives, provide opportunities for practice, and allow the teacher to check for understanding and provide feedback.

Why are adequate preparation and use of outside resource people important?

By virtue of their "real world" involvement and credibility, outsiders have the ability to influence students' views of and attitudes toward the law. In the classes that reduced delinquency, community professionals such as police officers were extensively involved. In addition, these professionals were given adequate preparation for working with young people. They understood how to present material effectively and what the purpose of the course was.

The opportunities for integrating practical application with the introduction of legal concepts through involvement of resource people may be widely underestimated. In the most rigorous attempt to make that connection observed in the study, a teacher arranged for resource people to team teach with her for half of an 18-week course. Teachers must realize, however, that without preparation, outsiders may find it difficult to walk the narrow line between a realistic presentation of the complexities and difficulties of the law and an overly cynical and skeptical indictment of actual legal practices. Teachers therefore need guidance on how to use and prepare resource persons.

Why is peer support important, and how can it be facilitated?

According to research studies, teachers try out new ideas and practices more willingly, competently, and persistently when (1) they talk regularly, frequently, and with considerable detail and precision about "how it's going," (2) they can observe the practices in action and can themselves be observed and assisted by others, (3) they have the opportunity for shared planning and preparation of lessons and materials, and (4) they work at teaching one another.

This sort of collegial interaction was rare in the LRE classes studied. In most cases, teachers were implementing the programs largely on their own. Even when other teachers were using the same materials and basic approaches, talk about "how it's going" and shared planning/preparation were rare. The main vehicle of support for LRE teachers was some sort of district-sponsored seminar. While these seminars provided a forum for discussion, a source of additional ideas and materials, and an opportunity for practice through peer-teaching, few provided for observation, feedback on actual performance, and in-class assistance.

Development of peer support can be facilitated by training *teams* of teachers, recruiting participants as colleagues and arranging for them to act as a group following the training. During training, participants should be treated as colleagues and provided with opportunities to work with one another. They should also be introduced to the skills of collegial/cooperative work; for example, they should be prepared to observe one another and to give one another useful feedback on performance.

Is it really possible to get building administrators interested in LRE?

It's not only possible, it's important. Involvement by administrators in the schools studied ranged from active disapproval through mildly interested endorsement and "permission" to active interest and participation. Teachers in schools where building administrators were actively interested in and supportive of LRE found implementing the program easier than did other teachers. Such teachers were less often faced with routine administrative decisions that hindered LRE effectiveness (e.g., using the LRE elective as a haven for troublesome students) and found administrators more amenable to decisions that supported LRE effectiveness (e.g., scheduling two LRE classes back-to-back to make participation by resource people in both classes easier). Supportive administrators can also aid the program by organizing opportunities for peer support, rewarding teachers who are trying to improve their teaching or strengthen the curriculum, and defending experimenting teachers against sources of strain inside or outside the school (e.g., complaints by other teachers that role play activities in LRE classes are too noisy).

Strategies for developing the support of building administrators include involving administrators in training or progress meetings; distributing a list of practical ways in which administrators can help teachers do a good job with LRE to administrators, teachers, and district coordinators; involving principals as members of local LRE advisory groups; and preparing teachers to understand the importance of the administrator's role and to negotiate the kinds of arrangements that make successful implementation more likely.

Are these six prescriptions the only important factors in determining whether LRE is effective in preventing delinquency?

Probably not. They are simply the factors that emerged in the first phase of the evaluation study. Additional classroom testing and observation, which is currently underway, may reveal other factors that are equally important. But the research to date indicates that these six factors are critical in enabling teachers to provide LRE programs that are effective in achieving a delinquency-prevention goal.

Does the ERIC data base include resources that would provide additional information on this topic?

The report detailing the study that developed these six prescriptions, entitled *Law-Related Education Evaluation Project Final Report: Phase II, Year I*, is currently being entered into the ERIC system. Watch for it in *Resources in Education*. In addition, the ERIC system includes many research studies and practical application papers about particular topics mentioned here — use of small-group work, cooperative learning, collegiality, dealing with controversial issues in the classroom, the role of administrators in effecting change, use of community resources. Check with the nearest library having an ERIC collection for more information.